INFORMATION ETHICS AND THE NEW MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR KENYA’S EDUCATION SECTOR

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Abstract

It is hardly a decade since the Internet and other forms of digital media became ubiquitous channels of communication and entertainment in Kenya. Its impact, especially among the youth, is profound. The users of the new media find themselves catapulted from a traditional setup where dissemination of information was an art that came blended with clear dos and don’ts, to the cyber age platform where no one seems to be in charge or care about it at all. This paper discusses the status, challenges and opportunities in teaching information ethics in Kenya. It specifically examines the impact of emerging new media technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones and digital TV on the youth and the challenges and opportunities that come with these technologies.

Introduction

The concept of information ethics (IE), developed in the 1980’s, seeks to address the issues of values and traditions, desired or derided by a given society. It attempts to create “the standard for judging behavior of an individual or a member of community and classifying these as moral or amoral” (Ahn, Ki 2006, p91). IE therefore prescribes the dos and don’ts in an information society. “Information ethics is a relatively new area of study comprised of several distinct yet interrelated disciplines including applied ethics, intellectual property, privacy, free speech, and societal control of information” (Moore, 2005, p.11).

The new media, which is an emerging mass media largely based on electronic communication, is critical to the field of IE because information is increasingly being processed electronically, from storage and retrieval to sharing and usage. The pervasiveness of indecent content, which was once disseminated locally, has become, with the development of the Internet, an issue of national and international concern (Keith, Hillard 2007). Technology-based communications has also had impact on African societies and cultures despite the challenges of access.

There is no such thing as a morally neutral technology. This is not to say just that technologies can be used and misused, but to express the deeper insight that all technologies create new ways of being.

They influence our relation with one another; they shape, in a more or less radical way, our institutions, our economies, and our moral values.
This is why we should focus on information technology primarily from an ethical perspective. It is up to the African people and their leaders to question how to transform their lives by these technologies. African educational and research institutions should also reflect critically on these issues. Capurro (2007, p8).

The new media, which is a catch-all term for the Internet, email, blogs, social networking sites (Myspace, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter etc) digital TV and mobile phones, is becoming a popular global information platform. It is the new form of mass media uniquely mediated by technology, especially the Internet. Unlike the traditional print and electronic media, the new media is interactive and user driven. The users themselves, rather than editors, determine the content. This poses a great challenge of trust, thus threatening to render the use of information dysfunctional. If not checked, it could scare new users, especially children.

Technology is a double-edged sword. A student can go online for gainful research or spent his or her time on phonographic sites or the “phonosphere” (Ahn, Ki 2006, p91). An attempt to control a student misusing the online facility could easily be repulsed by a claim to rights of privacy. Writing on the concerns of the growing information space, Holztman says; “one of our society’s great challenges will be to figure out how to create a balance between harms and benefits offered by global access to universal information” (Holztman, 2006, p69). When used appropriately, the new media promotes learning and research. But they could also be misused, often inadvertently by the users resulting in the compromising of their privacy, fraud and even harm to children by pedophiles. Rarely does a student, who posts his photographs, address and other personally identifiable information (PII) on Facebook, think of the invaluable trails he or she is leaving behind for a kidnapper or a fraudster to exploit. Although Facebook and other related sites are beginning to offer security tips which include reminding people to turn off some personal details, not much can be chopped off without killing the very purpose of its existence-to connect and share with friends, and strangers.

The new media also ruffles the fabrics of African social networks. Children are expected to keep company with the aged who would then impart the wisdom of the land to the younger generation. But this may not be possible when the children chat online or text friends. By engaging more with the “strangers without” than the “friends within”, the young make the elderly lonely and desperately excluded in the high-tech world. Parents may be keen to know the company their children keep in the physical neighborhood, but does it occur to them that they could keep bad company online? Still, digital media could work well for African cultures. It could be gainfully deployed to connect families. By sharing pictures and video of family events with members in the Diaspora, families are able to overcome the challenges of time and space and get together again the communal existence that is highly revered in Africa.
Studies and comments on information ethics in Africa are largely premised more on issues of access to online media rather than usage. Debates rage on the digital divide, pricing, universal access and so on. Although these issues have ethical implications, the value is derived more on usage than the connectivity.

But even with good connectivity and affordable access, the content people access, and especially the youth, is of great concern for the development of new media technologies. When buying computers, people ask for the “technical standards” and not the “ethical standards”. It is time the potential ethical impact of a machine on the user is defined on user manuals. The consumer protection groups, who preoccupy themselves with protecting society from the technical ability of gadgets and pricing, should be concerned that digital technologies can affect values negatively and therefore the need to protect people from such harm. Technology-centric approach can only produce a “gadgetry community” and not the much sought for and trendy “online community”. Communities, online or otherwise, are always bound by shared values and responsibilities. Is it possible to build an online community without first addressing the “people issues”; the ethics of technology?

The coming of information superhighway in Kenya

The diffusion and growth of ICTs in Kenya can only be understood from a historical perspective. The development of modern telecommunications infrastructure and the Internet in Kenya started on a particularly slow note. To begin with, the government was a reluctant convert to technology. In 1995, the government spelt out policies that fell short of banning the use of internet in public offices. It cautioned public servants not to connect computers to the Internet without seeking approvals from high offices. It cautioned public servants not to connect computers to the Internet without seeking approvals from high offices.

But five years later, in 2000, the government stance had changed to allow for “genuine use of Internet services” (Circular, OP-39/1A, 1995, p. 3). The indecisive government policies also affected other sectors, one being the USAID funded program, the Leland Initiative (1999), which sought, among other programs, to promote the use of ICT in institutions of higher learning in Kenya through the Kenya Education Network Trust (KENET). The implementation of KENET was delayed and frustrated by government bureaucracy.

But with the liberalization of the telecommunication sector, which begun in earnest in 1997, more service providers came in and competition and prices started falling, though not significantly at the beginning. For a long time therefore, connectivity remained comparatively low in Kenya’s private and public sectors.

The need to use ICTs for business and communications is apparent. We live in the globalized information age where data will increasingly connect people and drive economies. How societies use and control information will continue to define their success, failure and safety.
Technology has made it easy to store and retrieve information. Issues such as Intellectual Property Rights, Privacy and Copyrights are critical to business while sensitive information in the wrong hands could threaten the security of a nation. The uses of personally identifiable information continue to fuel debates on the rights of an individual in relation to national security.

“The tension between individual privacy, free speech and national security continue to generate moral, legal, and political disagreements,” (Moore, Unsworth, 2004). Because of the importance of IE, especially the kind that is mediated by emerging technologies, it is important to inculcate values among users and consumers of media, and especially children and the youth.

The growing bandwidth and the pervasive users

The landing of Fibre Optic undersea cable in Kenya in 2009 and the removal of taxes by government on computers is changing the connectivity landscape. The Internet is becoming affordable and therefore the social stratification across age, regions, incomes and even education, hitherto defined by access, is being dismantled. The current price wars and roll out of third generation mobile services, 3G, will get more people connected countrywide at even more affordable rates.

The exponential growth of mobile phones for communication and business is a demonstration that ICTs are becoming a way of life even among low income populations. Kenya’s mobile phone industry has accelerated from a few hundreds subscribers in the year 2000 to 20 million in 2010. With innovative systems such as the use of mobile phones to transfer money (Mpesa and Zap), the transmission of election results via mobile phones and the compulsory registration of SIM cards in August, 2010, the mobile phone will undoubtedly become an integral gadget in Kenya and the mobile phone number will probably be the most effective reference or address to an individual.

But as technology flourishes, so too is the abuse of it. Hate messages have been broadcast by SMS and emails, fueling conflict and causing panic among communities in Kenya. A strange SMS was recently circulated in Kenya warning people not to receive calls from certain numbers because if they did, they would develop brain hemorrhage and die instantly. It went further to reveal that 27 people had already died from the “killer application”. Ridiculous as it was, it managed to cause panic and seriously affected mobile phone communications, prompting the government and service providers to call a press conference to dispel the rumors.

Studies have shown that people behave differently when interacting online than they would face-to-face in the physical world. Suler (2004, p1) calls this phenomenon the disinhibition effect of online communication. Feeling that they are shielded by the distance and remoteness of the media they are using, users share personal information, reveal emotions or even become extraordinarily generous. On the other hand they could criticize harshly, demonstrate hatred and even threaten.
It is therefore crucial that deliberate efforts are made to sensitize users on the need to uphold good morals when interacting via technology and to understand the legal consequences of abusing the medium.

**Challenges of new media**

In April 2010, Kenyan media reported that the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims had banned the satellite broadcasting by DSTv in Mandera town, North Eastern Province. “Also outlawed are video dens, blamed for eroding moral values among the youth and causing poor academic performance” (Daily Nation, April 27, 2010).

The Muslim elders also threatened to close down dozens of spots in other towns of the province where young people frequent to watch football matches and other entertainment programs. Kenya’s information Minister said the move was illegal and a violation of the rights of the individual but Muslim community maintained that DSTv had bad influence on the youth and had to be done away with. Although not much has been reported since then on the Mandera stand off or the impact the new medium had on the youth, the incident, in many ways, raises pertinent ethical issues that come with use of new media technologies such as public pay TV, mobile phones and the Internet.

The coming of technology has hugely upset subtle communication structures and protocols in Africa. Firstly, technology tends to empower the individual rather than the community. Mobile phones are owned and operated by individuals. Prior to this scenario, there used to be the family phone and the family post office number or letter box. The radio now is a personal gadget since it can be accessed on the phone and online by individuals. The challenge here is how to ensure ethical use of the “individualized information systems”.

Secondly, new media does not recognize the traditional set ups of age, gender or religion. The tradition in most African cultures provided for control mechanisms that ensured that appropriate information got to the intended consumer. Elders, pressed to keep some privacy, would use proverbs, metaphors and sign language to by-pass a young audience when they are not the target audiences of their messages. Now children and the youth use technology to isolate their parents, who are not so averse with technology.

Thirdly, through rituals like circumcision, members of a community were classified into age groups with different rights and privileges to information. Gender also determined the kind of information an individual could access. Women interacted and shared information with the girls while the men interacted with boys. Whereas roles and obligations were clear in the traditional offline world, the modern online platform is hazy. The Internet “tells” anyone who can access it anything! It is important therefore that children are taught to “listen” only to the useful messages technology offers.
One other challenge is identifying the person or institution responsible for ethical issues of the new media. Is it the teacher, parent, government and even technology in manufacturer who defines and enforces the ethical use of information in the new set up?

When a BBC reporter questioned the legal basis of banning DSTv broadcasts in the incident involving a Muslim community in Kenya, an elder’s response was “The law is the people”. In essence, he was saying that even with policies and laws, local concerns and value systems must prevail.

But even if Kenya had good laws and policies to guide the use of information, the challenge would still be on how to enforce. The new media is not restricted to territorial boundaries and therefore difficult to police and arbitrate issues.

**Teaching Information Ethics in Kenya**

Technology drives the information age without a manual. No one ever takes formal lessons on the basics of email or Short Message Text, SMS. But even in cases where computers are taught, emphasis is often laid on the understanding of computers or what Ahn and Ki (2006, 91), refer to as “the cognitive sphere” and the ability to use it (“the functional sphere”). Rarely is the “sentimental sphere”, or attitude towards computers by the society considered a problem.

Although universities and colleges build technology systems that allow students to interact with lecturers online, there are hardly any rules or obligations spelt out on the use of technology for communication. This is because the use of technology in teaching (e-learning) and for administration is still new and much effort is put into making the systems work, rather than getting users, the teachers and students, use it ethically.

Students are not sensitized on email etiquette yet they are expected to use email beyond college as they seek for employment. Hardly are the youth skilled to recognize frauds and hoaxes yet we expect them to transact money safely online and to be successful in emerging e-business. These contradictions and gaps clearly demonstrate that we are indeed driving technology without people.

In Kenya, like in many other countries globally, ethics is viewed as a supportive subject to a major discipline. It is common to find “Ethics and Law” or “Ethics and Journalism” classes. It is rare, if not impossible, to find a class dedicated “Information Ethics”.

At Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JCUAT), a University with popular IT and telecommunications programs, the closest they get to teaching I.E. is in “Communication Skills” lessons. At Strathmore, renowned for business studies, it is in the “Business Ethics” program that ethics is taught though not with much depth.
Others domicile teaching of topics on IE in Library Information Science (LIS). Information Ethics is therefore sandwiched in some traditional program that is likely to be allocated less time and seriousness.

The teaching of aspects of ethics, especially in junior and primary schools, is considered “extra-curriculum ” in the same way Physical Education (PE), was (and still is) viewed. This retrogressive attitude is largely informed by value judgments and culture. Traditionally, value systems were taught or imparted to children by parents as part of upbringing; hence the lackluster approach to a structured, formal school-based approach.

In addition, there are few regulations and policies that guide colleges and universities who teach some form of ethics. The Media Bill 2007 is probably the only piece of legislation which makes reference to information mediated by technology. In schedule 2 (section 3), it requires journalists to “use technological tools with skill and thoughtfulness, avoiding techniques that skew facts, distort reality, or sensationalize events” (Media Bill, 2007, p28).

Mainstream Information Ethics in schools and colleges is informed by the need to:

a) Build a culture of responsibility among the youth using information technologies (eg mobile phones will not be used to cheat during exams)

b) Inculcate the key principles of Information Ethics- respect for Intellectual Property, Privacy, Decency etc

c) Prohibit mischief- hacking and other Internet crime

**Opportunities for teaching Information Ethics in Kenya**

Kenya has a great opportunity to begin on a clean slate since new media is yet to penetrate all spheres of live and regions. Since ICTs have not taken root in most schools and colleges, the scenario, though regrettable, gives an opportunity to get things right from the beginning. Information Ethics will be instrumental in the implementation of e-learning programs as well as provide safeguards for those creating local content for commercial use like the A24 Media, the online site which allows journalists to sell video materials to broadcasters. Kenya, like most African countries is an emerging market for high definition television and other digital technologies.

Kenya also has skilled people in information science and IT. Their skills only need a little tweaking towards appreciating IE. There is great opportunity in e-government program which is being rolled out countrywide. One relevant aspect of e-government to IE is the E-transaction Bill 2010, which seeks to introduce laws that address the unique issues of the online environment.
There is considerable diffusion of technology in Kenya. People have seen technology work for them for money transfer and electoral technology. They easily would be receptive to any measures to improve and safeguard technologies that are transforming their lives.

**Conclusion**

In my presentation, I have made an attempt to analyze issues emanating from efforts on teaching Information Ethics in Kenya. I will now raise a few concerns that need to be addressed.

a) Who is responsible for compliance and control of information in the digital world?

b) How do we draw the line between use and misuse of information online?

c) How will policies and guidelines for ethical use of information in the modern age, if ever made, be enforced?

Kids need to be taught IE at formative stages so that they could grow with “filters in the head” that help them differentiate between right and wrong online. The entry point and entry age is very important for success in teaching IE. It is critical that children are taught IE on new media at places where they first access it.

Kenyans, like other African communities have a sharing culture. Given the right content and controls, they could make use of the emerging technologies for their wellbeing. Undoubtedly, sharing the wrong, unethical information on the Internet could dissuade people from using the technology.

While Africa may have missed out on past civilizations, technology driven revolution that is sweeping the world fast and furious provides a chance not to be missed. But this can only be possible if interventions for online safety and trust are quickly put in place. Can the African child dream to be part of the brave new world and still remain an African child?
References


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